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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 001927

NOFORN
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/20/2023
TAGS: [FR](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MEPP](#)
SUBJECT: FRANCE PREPARES TO ENGAGE NEW US ADMINISTRATION ON
THE MIDDLE EAST

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen H. Allegrone, reas
ons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) Summary/comment: France's foreign policy establishment plans to engage the new U.S. administration as soon as possible (even, perhaps, before the formal inauguration) on a range of Middle East issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Iran, and Syria/Lebanon. In the hope of presenting the new U.S. team with a concerted European position, FM Kouchner will use the November 4 meeting of Mediterranean Foreign Ministers in Marseille to persuade his German, British, Italian and Spanish counterparts to adopt France's thinking on an expanded supportive role for the EU in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, including possible assurances that the international community could offer the parties on permanent status issues; France will then try to enshrine those ideas in an updated version of the November 2007 EU Action Plan for the Middle East, to be blessed at the November 10-11, 2008 GAERC. Although the French understand U.S. and Israeli reservations about their proposals, President Sarkozy and FM Kouchner are determined to press forward with this dialogue. During his Oct. 3-5 visit to Israel, FM Kouchner found the Israelis feeling "more threatened" by Iran and even more determined to do whatever it takes to prevent Tehran from building a nuclear bomb; Kouchner stressed that for the moment there are still better options than military strikes. The French will seek an early signal from the new U.S. team as to their thinking on additional sanctions, although working level contacts in the MFA are not optimistic that tougher sanctions would prove effective. Moreover, they fear the Iranians will continue enriching uranium while France waits for the new U.S. administration to "learn the ropes." On Syria, France will undoubtedly encourage Washington to shift to a strategy of engagement, and will point to President Bashar al-Asad's recent announcement of diplomatic relations with Lebanon as proof that Syrian behavior is malleable and that the French approach is working. The French will also want to test the new administration's receptivity to the idea of joint Franco-American sponsorship of direct Syrian-Israeli talks. We should begin thinking now about the timing and structure of a transitional dialogue with France on the Middle East, with an eye towards: First, channeling France's enthusiasm on the peace process into Quartet-endorsed projects that will promote trust between the parties rather than interjecting third-party ideas into the bilateral negotiations; second, reassuring the French of continuity in our Iran policy; and third, pressing the French to apply an objective yardstick in their year-end review of Syrian progress on President Sarkozy's benchmarks. See extended comment in para 9. End summary/comment.

The MEPP: France Sees Opportunity

¶3. (C) France's foreign policy establishment plans to engage the new U.S. administration as soon as possible (even,

perhaps, before the formal inauguration) on a range of Middle East issues, judging by comments in recent meetings with a range of French MFA officials (including an Oct. 17 meeting with Christophe Bigot, FM Kouchner's Middle East advisor) as well as local UK, Egyptian and Israeli embassy contacts. At the top of France's agenda is the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which French officials fear will not be a priority for any incoming U.S. administration. Paradoxically, the French also see Washington's potential benign neglect of the Middle East peace process (MEPP) as an opportunity for France, via the EU, to play a more prominent role in supporting the process. "It's the same old story -- they want to play, not just pay," according to Israeli Political Counselor Daniel Halevy.

¶4. (C) Specifically, the French have been working at the NEA A/S level within the EU Quint to reach agreement on updating the November 2007 EU Action Plan for the Middle East to include forward-leaning proposals on assurances that the international community could offer the parties on a variety of final status issues, chief of which are the status of Jerusalem, security (the French have publicly affirmed their willingness to be part of an international force of observers or peacekeepers to help enforce any agreement the parties reach), and the fate of Palestinian refugees. Anxious to achieve consensus on these issues before France ends its EU presidency, FM Kouchner will likely raise them during a discussion of the future of the trans-Atlantic relationship, now proposed for the margins of the November 4 meeting of Mediterranean Union FMs in Marseille. (Other issues slated for that discussion include Afghanistan/Pakistan and Russia.) If that discussion goes well, the French hope the updated EU

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Action Plan will be approved at the November GAERC and will form the basis of common talking points that EU member states will use when engaging the new U.S. administration on the MEPP. According to UK Pol/C Hamish Cowell, the UK (which, along with Germany, had some initial doubts about the French approach) is now more or less on board with France's thinking -- provided that the Israelis and Palestinians agree. "I don't believe there is much EU debate on it (the Action Plan) at the moment," said Cowell, who hinted that the Germans have also dropped their objections because they, like the British, regard the exercise as largely academic.

¶4. (C) The French are well aware of significant U.S. reservations regarding their approach, in part thanks to recent visits to Washington by MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Patrice Paoli and DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille. They also recognize that the Israelis are distinctly unenthusiastic: FM Livni phoned Kouchner prior to the last Gymnich meeting in Avignon and asked him not to circulate a paper outlining France's proposals (Kouchner agreed, no doubt in part because the agenda had already been overtaken by the crisis in Georgia); the Israeli MFA sent a delegation to Paris to express its concern over France's MEPP activism; and Kouchner found Livni still unconvinced during his October 3-5 visit to Israel. Bigot noted ruefully that Kouchner had not managed to develop much personal warmth with Livni, whom he found "a bit obstinate and confrontational," and suggested that Kouchner would wait until Livni had finished forming her government before informing her that France is pressing forward with its proposals.

Iran: MFA Anxious to See Where Washington Goes

¶5. (S/NF) Bigot told PolMin/C that Kouchner found the Israelis feeling "more threatened" by Iran, and hence more determined than ever to doing whatever it takes to prevent the Iranian regime from obtaining a nuclear weapon. In short, said Bigot, the Israelis were "a little bit closer to bombing." In response, Kouchner stressed that for the time being, there are still better alternatives to military strikes. In a recent meeting with DOD U/S Edelman, Strategic

Affairs advisor P. Errera noted that the economic downturn seems to be having an impact on the way Iranian leaders think and act, possibly giving greater hope that the sanctions policy will have a positive effect.

¶6. (S/NF) However, working-level diplomats at the MFA are not particularly optimistic about the chances for reaching a diplomatic solution with the Iranians, even if sanctions were further tightened, the P5 1 were to further sweeten their offer, and President Ahmadinejad were not re-elected. "No one here thinks it will change anything," said Franck Gellet (the MFA's NEA DAS-equivalent for Iran), speaking in an Oct. 17 meeting with NEA Watcher and visiting France Desk Officer Andrew Lorenz. Gellet (who tends to believe that the issue will ultimately have to be resolved by force) said his Israeli interlocutors were concerned that the P5 1 would "lose a year" waiting for the new U.S. administration to learn the ropes, during which time the Iranian regime would "merrily" continue enriching uranium. Gellet said it would be useful for the new U.S. administration to compare notes with France and like-minded EU states as early as possible, not least so that the Europeans can get a sense of where Washington would like to go with regard to sanctions and engagement. In the interim, Gellet said the French would continue to push its EU partners to go further on sanctions, and would push Moscow not to sell Iran its S-300 anti-aircraft system.

Syria/Lebanon: French Will Advocate Engagement

¶7. (C) On Syria, the French are certain to encourage the new U.S. administration to consider a strategy of engagement. They will argue, on the basis of Syrian performance before and after President Sarkozy's visit to Damascus, that Syrian behavior is malleable -- and is moving in a more positive direction at present. In making their case, they will point (with a certain amount of self-satisfaction) to what they see as evidence that engagement works:

- President Asad's October 14 announcement of diplomatic relations with Lebanon;
- Recent meetings of joint Syrian-Lebanese committees on delineating the border and returning prisoners;
- Bashar al-Asad's commitment to President Sarkozy to continue indirect contacts with Israel and his invitation for France and the U.S. to co-sponsor direct Israeli-Syrian talks;

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- The delivery (via the good offices of the Emir of Qatar) of a letter to captured Franco-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from his father;
- The August 14 visit of President Sleiman to Damascus;
- Syrian acquiescence to the election of Lebanese President Sleiman, and to Lebanese PM Siniora retaining his post;
- Syrian support of the Doha Accords;
- The token release of some political prisoners.

The French will add that they are under no illusions about the nature of the Syrian regime, and have therefore been careful to set out meaningful benchmarks against which to measure Syrian progress. The French have promised to take a hard look at year's end at what the Syrians have delivered before taking any further steps on engagement.

¶8. (C) Finally, there is a remote possibility that the French will argue that Hizballah (which has both French and American blood on its hands) is simply too large and powerful to be ignored. "My guess is that President Sarkozy despises Hizballah, but it's a major political force in Lebanon. Yes, it is a terrorist group -- but it also controls a large number of seats in the parliament, and Israel has failed to destroy it in two separate wars," said DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille, in reviewing the reasons France has decided to maintain a political dialogue with Hizballah.

Comment

19. (C/NF) The French increasingly see the next U.S. administration as their target audience for a strategic conversation about the Middle East. One unfortunate consequence is that they have begun politely discounting USG messages not to their liking (e.g., cautions that their MEPP final status ideas are premature). To a certain extent, this is inevitable -- and should be understood less as evidence of France's disagreement with current USG policies than as tacit recognition that Washington will continue to set the parameters on many of these issues. We should welcome their interest in having a conversation at the earliest feasible date, not least so that we can shape French/EU thinking. In particular, we might seek to channel France's enthusiasm for playing a larger role on the peace process into exercising leadership on Quartet-endorsed projects that will promote trust between the parties rather than interjecting third-party ideas into the bilateral negotiations. In addition, we will want to reassure the French of continuity in our Iran policy and press them to apply an objective yardstick in their year-end review of Syrian progress on President Sarkozy's benchmarks. Such a conversation could help to lay the foundation for continued or improved cooperation in each of these important domains.

STAPLETON